Description of Common Tasks

Rhode Island Skills Commission

Explanation and Considerations for Use

The Rhode Island Skills Commission developed this document, which can be used as a guide to writing tasks. It provides a definition of a task, descriptions of types of tasks, examples of uses of tasks, and a discussion of the role of applied learning in developing tasks.

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What are Tasks?

A task is an opportunity for a student to demonstrate one or more proficiencies. Usually, a task defines something that has to be accomplished and, when a person accomplishes the task, it shows that the person has the skills and knowledge required to "get the job done". Teachers use all kinds of tasks—they give quizzes to see how well students are learning the materials they have been taught and they give exams to make judgments about grades. Teachers also give short papers, research papers, and term projects to get evidence about how well their students have learned important skills and knowledge. All these are examples of tasks that are in everyday use in every school in the state.

Since successfully completing a task is a way of telling whether a person has some particular knowledge or skill, tasks are an important part of the educational process. For example, the successful performance of a student on a task can be used as evidence to help make a determination about whether or not a student can meet a standard. And, if the student's performance does not meet standard, there may be clues in the way the student did the task that would help prepare the student to be successful on another similar task. For students who are traditionally not well educated this is an extremely important thing: when used to re-teach students who have not reached a standard, *tasks help ensure that students don't get left behind and help close equity gaps.*

What are Common Tasks?

The examples of tasks mentioned above have very little in common from classroom to classroom. For example, when a teacher gives a quiz, the content of the quiz is usually determined by what the teacher is teaching, not by common agreements across the teachers in a grade, or across all the teachers teaching the subject, or across all teachers in the school, about what the content of the quiz should be. So one thing that makes a task "common" is the agreement that it will be given across classrooms. And, the wider the agreement, the more the task is a common task.

However, using tasks across classrooms in a school or even more widely--across a district or across the state--means that the task needs to meet several criteria. First, the task must measure skills and knowledge that is agreed upon as important. This can be accomplished by aligning the task to district or state standards (GLEs & GSEs) and expectations. This means that the task identifies that standard or expectation it measures and that the task prompt specifies a performance that clearly requires the knowledge and skills described by the identified standard.

Second, the task needs to be given in such a way that no student is unduly helped or hindered by the conditions under which the task is administered. This means that there need to be written directions for the administration of the task that are carefully thought out and carefully followed. This may require that the teachers administering the task

need to have the administrative conditions explained to them just to make sure no one misunderstands how the task should be used.

Then, there need to be procedures for scoring the task. In order for a task to be a fair assessment of a student's performance, everyone who scores a task should score it in a very similar manner. In order to ensure that this happens, teachers need to have a common understanding of the performance that the task requires, a common understanding of what features of the task they are scoring (e. g., the organization of an essay) and what features of a task they are not scoring (e. g., handwriting). And they need to have a common understand of how they score all these features.

To summarize, a common task meets the following three crucial criteria. The task:

1. Is clearly connected to a standard/GLE/GSE that is endorsed by the district or the state (these are not necessarily district or state standards, they may be standards developed by professional associations or other organizations that are endorsed by the district or state),

2. Has a clear description of how it is administered and is administered in a way that allows all students taking the task the best chance at success (tasks should also be designed and written to ensure that they are designed to be accessible to all students and to trigger the best possible performance from all students), and

3. Is scored using protocols that allow scorers to assess performances as similarly as possible in order to yield a score that accurately reflects the knowledge and skills of the student (these protocols should exercises that help teachers understand how scoring criteria are concretely applied to a range of performances).

A Caution

The phrase "yield a score that accurately reflects the knowledge and skills of the student" in item 3 just above should be used carefully because there is always the possibility that a specific performance on a task does not really represent the true proficiency of a student or that a scorer does not really understand what a student is doing in the task. The way a task is written or administered may confuse a student, or a student may misinterpret a word or phrase that throws the whole performance off. Or, the student may be disinclined to do the task, or be sick, or be districted—all conditions that could result in an underperformance. Consequently, the score of any one task may not be an accurate reflection of a student's true knowledge and skills should always be balanced against other evidence about the student's abilities.

Major Uses of Tasks

The reality that task scores are not always accurate reflections of students' abilities is a caution to consider when using tasks, but it is a caution that should be balanced by the fact that tasks, in general, have many genuinely useful purposes. Some of these include:

- Classroom teachers can use tasks to focus in on what their students are learning and see how effectively they have been teaching and what needs to be re-taught. Thus they can see the progress of their class towards their curricular goals and can keep all students moving towards those goals. They can spot when students miss key concepts or lack important skills and address those problems.

- Interdisciplinary teams of teachers can see how well students are developing knowledge and skills that cut across their subjects, such as the ability to analyze information and draw conclusions, to write persuasively about their reasoning, or to spot weak points in arguments.

- Academic departments can use tasks to assess the knowledge and skills students have in core skills and knowledge that the department considers pre-eminently important. They can also spot the skills and knowledge that are not being learned and address that by changing their curriculum, materials, scheduling, or instructional methods.

- Schools can use tasks to gauge the progress of all students towards goals for learning (or learner outcomes) that all students need to achieve at certain educational mileposts. For example, a school might be committed to preparing all it students to be able to critically evaluate a piece of literature by the end of grade ten, addressing such key components as plot, characters, diction, setting, and use of symbolism. They can then use the results to address curricular and instructional issue and improve the opportunities students have to develop skills and learn knowledge.

- Districts can use tasks to see how well students are learning across their schools, spotting areas of strength and weakness and responding with technical assistance and other support.

- Inter-district networks (or the entire state) can use tasks to see how well students are learning across schools and use this information to inform districts and schools about areas of learning they need to pay attention to.

Another Meaning of the Term "Common"

All the different uses of tasks just mentioned can be represented on the following dimension showing different ways tasks can be "common" in relation to the students they assess.

Common within classrooms	Common within schools	Common across schools

Each of the different uses just described creates differences in the way:

- Tasks are written (classroom teachers, writing tasks for classroom purposes, design them to be useful in the instructional process as it is occurring for a particular content for a particular class of students: School faculties, writing tasks for school-wide assessments, design them to be aligned with school standards, to have a standard format and administration, and to be accessible to all students in the school using the principles of universal design),

- Students are prepared for tasks (classroom teachers will prepare their students for tasks through normal classroom instruction while school faculties, in addition to instructing the skills and knowledge measured by the task, may need to prepare students to function in the environment specified by the task, including doing tasks under time constraints, reading directions carefully, and thinking carefully about task prompts.)

- Teachers score tasks (classroom teachers can score their tasks just by reading them or they may use a rubric they have developed on their own; when school faculties score tasks, they need common, agreed upon, criteria, they need training to apply those criteria in the same way, and they need to ensure that their personal knowledge about students doesn't influence the way they score tasks), and

- Task results are used (classroom teachers use task results directly and immediately to effect instruction and may do so in different ways for different students; in addition to refocusing instruction, school faculties may use task results to effect the school's professional development program, the educational materials the school buys, the order in which the curriculum is taught, and other structural features of the school such as the schedule, the educational programming, and the staffing).

These differences can be used to define the following dimension.

Why and how tasks are written	How students are prepared	How tasks are scored	How results are used

And, connecting these two dimensions creates the following table.

Why and how tasks are written	How students are prepared	How tasks are scored	How results are used
Tasks that are Common Within a Classroom			
Written by a single teacher to measure student learning in relation to particular instructional goals of the teacher class	Classroom instruction as structured by the teachers	The classroom teacher scores the tasks using a criteria list or rubric	Guide classroom instruction, focus instruction on students that haven't learned what the task assesses, move all students to the next level
Tasks that are Common Within a School			
Written by academic departments, interdisciplinary teams, school improvement teams, to measure learning important to the group	Academic departments, interdisciplinary teams, or school agree on what the content of instruction will be and use instruction differentiated to address all students taught	Teachers use a common rubric(s)	Revise subject curriculum, identify areas of student weakness and refocus instruction, identify groups of students who are not learning well and create special instructional arrangements for them
Tasks that are Common Across Schools			
Written by teams representative of the schools or authored from outside the school or district	Preparation is incorporated into district curriculum	Scorers use rubric with tuning protocol, Scorer agreement is checked, benchmark papers and scoring notes provided	Revise district curriculum, inform professional development program and academic program, inform scheduling and grouping of students for instruction

Of the tasks described in this table, those described as "Common Across Schools" meet the three crucial criteria for "common tasks" described in the preceding section. That does not mean that the tasks described in the other parts of the table are not good tasks or that they do not have legitimate purposes. Nor does it mean that they cannot become common tasks by revising them so they do meet those criteria. It simple means that using

tasks across common settings does not make them common tasks (see the table *Different Kinds of Tasks*).

Adding Applied Learning to Tasks

It is important to pay close attention to the skills tasks require because a) these need to be important for students to learn and b) they impact directly what teachers teach and how they instruct. For example, some skills require direct instruction while other require opportunities for independent exploration, and the classroom practices related to each kind are very different. Consequently, tasks need to describe the skills they test as explicitly as possible.

The newly developed Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) and Grade Span Expectations (GSEs) in mathematics and English Language Arts will help clarify the kinds of skills students should learn in any discipline as well as the content they should learn that is specific to math and ELA. Newly developed material about applied learning (see *An Overview of "Applied Learning"*) adds further clarification to the kinds of skills students need to learn and which, therefore, should be incorporated into instruction--and tasks that measure the impact of instruction. In broad strokes, the following are the kinds of applied learning skills that teachers, schools, and districts should incorporate into their tasks:

- Critical thinking
- Problem Solving
- Research
- Communication
- Reflection, and Evaluation

The Skills Commission draws the following parallels between these skills and the different kinds of tasks that can be used in schools (see the diagram *Pathways to Proficien*cy):

- ON-DEMAND TASKS: Requires that students use basic skills and knowledge to *solve a problem and communicate the solution*.

- EXTENDED TASKS: Require students to use basic skills and knowledge to solve a problem and communicate the solution as well as to *use reflective, research, and consulting skills*

- MINI-EXHIBITION: Requires students to use basic skills and knowledge to solve a problem and communicate the solution as well as to use reflective, research, and consulting skills as well as to *use own interests to define goals and own organization to achieve that goal*.

- EXHINBITION: Requires students to use basic skills and knowledge to solve a problem and communicate the solution as well as to use reflective, research, and

consulting skills to *locate and solve a problem in the community or add to the understanding of an issue or problem*.

Common tasks of the type listed above should be careful to include descriptions of the applied learning skills they test. In general, the Skills Commission thinks of these different kinds of tasks—which measure different combinations of applied learning skills—as a progression. The least complex tasks are the on-demand tasks and high schools should work to ensure that their ninth graders have the skills and knowledge to meet standard on these tasks. Extended tasks require a more complex combination of applied learning skills and are more appropriate as a goal for tenth graders. The mini-capstone tasks require students to begin to use applied learning skills to pursue their own interests and lay the foundation for the Capstone to be completed in the eleventh and twelfth grades.